The Cleveland Museum of Art

William H. Johnson: An American Modern

News Release
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CMA presents rare opportunity to see works by preeminent artist William H. Johnson

CLEVELAND (December 12, 2012) –The Cleveland Museum of Art presents *William H. Johnson: An American Modern,* a free exhibition showcasing a rarely seen selection of works by the African American artist whose career spanned two decades and three continents. On view through January 27, 2013, the exhibition highlights Johnson's artistic achievements through 22 objects in a variety of subjects and media. Drawn from the collection of the James E. Lewis Museum of Art at Morgan State University, Baltimore and supplemented by two works from the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Smithsonian traveling exhibition charts the pivotal stages of Johnson's fascinating artistic evolution. *William H. Johnson: An American Modern* inaugurates the museum's new Kelvin and Eleanor Smith Exhibition Gallery and is complemented by a diverse schedule of related programming.

"William H. Johnson is a pivotal figure in American art, yet opportunities to enjoy surveys of his work are few and far between," noted Mark Cole, associate curator of American painting and sculpture. "This is a special treat for visitors to the Cleveland Museum of Art."

Born and raised in rural South Carolina, Johnson migrated north as a young man, graduating from the National Academy of Design, New York, where he mastered its traditional curriculum. Shortly afterward, he launched his career in France and began exploring a range of modernist styles. For much of the 1930s, he lived in Scandinavia and traveled extensively throughout Europe and northern Africa. The threat of the Second World War prompted Johnson's return to the United States, where he settled in Harlem, joining a vibrant community of artists interested in addressing their African American heritages and experiences. One of his most memorable screenprints from this period, *Jitterbugs III,* was recently acquired by the Cleveland Museum of Art and is making its public debut in the exhibition. Unfortunately during the late 1940s, Johnson was diagnosed with a debilitating disease that cut short his artistic production.

"Johnson's tremendous skill and versatility as a painter and printmaker--coupled with his fascinating artistic trajectory--make for one compelling exhibition," said Cole.

Johnson's art was widely exhibited in Europe and the United States during his career, although he did not achieve sustained recognition until the late 1960s. Around this time, Morgan State University acquired a significant group of the artist's work from the Smithsonian Institution. *William H. Johnson: An American Modern* marks the first national tour of this important collection.

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue that features essays by several art historians, including Richard J. Powell and Leslie King Hammond (University of Washington Press,

2011, $26.95). *William H. Johnson: An American Modern* was developed by Morgan State University and Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. The exhibition is made possible through the generous support of the National Endowment for the Arts, the Henry Luce Foundation, Morgan State University Foundation Inc and the Ford Motor Company Fund.

Programming Schedule

William H. Johnson: An American Modern Docent Tour, Fridays from 2:30 to 3:30 p.m.
(December 14, 21, 28; January 4, 11, 18) Free.
Special docent tours focused on *William H. Johnson: An American Modern.* This will be a great opportunity to learn more about the life of William H. Johnson as well as the back ground of individual art pieces in the exhibition.

Do the Jitterbug!, January 13, 2:00 to 3:00 p.m. Free
Shake off the winter chill and celebrate *William H. Johnson: An American Modern* by getting your Jitterbug on with Valerie Salstrom of Get Hep Swing. Learn steps to dances Johnson saw in clubs in New York during the 1930s at the William H. Johnson-themed Family Day in January.

William H. Johnson Family Day, January 13, 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Free.
Explore the exhibition with a free family guide, learn a few steps of jitterbug and make a collage inspired by William H. Johnson.

William H. Johnson: Primitiveness, Modernism & African American Culture, January 20, 2:00 p.m. Free.
Richard Powell, John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art and Art History, Duke University, tracks a trajectory of Johnson's life and examines his shifting approach to painting that reflects varying contexts and different chronological moments: rigorous training in the academy, a decade-long immersion in progressive European art circles and participation in the Greenwich Village art scene during the Second World War.

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About the Cleveland Museum of Art

The Cleveland Museum of Art is renowned for the quality and breadth of its collection, which includes more than 63,000 artworks and spans 6,000 years of achievement in the arts. The museum is a significant international forum for exhibitions, scholarship and performing arts and is a leader in digital innovations. One of the top comprehensive art museums in the nation, recognized for its award-winning Open Access program and free of charge to all, the Cleveland Museum of Art is located in the University Circle neighborhood.

The museum is supported in part by residents of Cuyahoga County through a public grant from Cuyahoga Arts & Culture and made possible in part by the Ohio Arts Council (OAC), which receives support from the State of Ohio and the National Endowment for the Arts. The OAC is a state agency that funds and supports quality arts experiences to strengthen Ohio communities culturally, educationally and economically. For more information about the museum and its holdings, programs and events, call 888-CMA-0033 or visit cma.org [1].

Press Announcements [2]

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